The foregoing study has tried to see how Iris Murdoch’s acute perceptive intelligence and her moral passion are revealed in the moral realism of her novels. The same realism is reflected in the moral quagmire which she sees as a condition of life. Such preoccupation with the moral life is the mark of a true artist. The writers whom Murdoch herself admires, Shakespeare, George Eliot, the nineteenth-century Russian novelists, in particular Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, all have in their work this luminous, truthful quality of moral realism.

It may be salutary at this point to underline the subtle distinction between the authenticity with which the moral life is depicted in any work and the form of realism which that work may follow. In a novelist like Tolstoy there is virtually no difference between moral realism and the realistic form of presentation. So intimately are the two elements blended in a novel like Anna Karenina that the transparency of the form is the moral vision of the writer. The present study implicitly assumes the effortless supremacy of realism over other forms. Comparison need only be made between a short story like The Death of Ivan Ilyich (since we
are on Tolstoy) and The Metamorphosis by Kafka, both stories dealing with identical themes of suffering and death, and the alienation which they bring, to see how realism triumphs over fantasy, even when the latter form is used to project and show up reality. It should be noted, however, that the 'transparent' realism of Tolstoy is itself ideologically determined and appears transparent precisely because it reflects the ebb and flow of the bourgeois world which the reader inhabits and recognises. It seems therefore to be more realistic, more true to the life the reader, or, at any rate, the present writer, knows than surrealistic distortions which highlight dimensions carefully kept out of sight in bourgeois society. The question to be raised is: into which group does Murdoch fall? If she is writing in the tradition of realism, how does she compare with the 'great ones' of the great tradition?

While there is no gainsaying the fact that Iris Murdoch is one of the most important novelists of all time, and perhaps, the most important novelist that this half of the century has produced, the difference in her work between the moral realism that she shares with other great novelists, and the tradition of realism in which she and they write has to be noted. There is no doubt that from the moral point of view she is realistic. Iris Murdoch herself asserts that morality is a form of realism and goes on to say:
... Rilke said of Cezanne that he did not paint 'I like it', he painted, 'There it is'. This is not easy and requires, in art or morals, a discipline. One might say here that art is an excellent analogy of morals, or indeed that it is in this respect a case of morals. We cease to be in order to attend to the existence of something else, a natural object, a person in need. We can see in mediocre art, where perhaps it is even more clearly seen than in mediocre conduct, the intrusion of fantasy, the assertion of self, the dimming of any reflection of the real world.

Iris Murdoch's art is definitely not 'mediocre'. Its concern for moral endeavour so deeply a part of everyday human living, its refusal to offer consolations co-existing with an apprehension of a transcendent Good is too striking a combination to be anything but the work of a significant novelist.

But there is a difference. The difference that strikes even a casual reader of her works is that while there are no spurious consolations in her novels (as there are none in, say, the work of Tolstoy or George Eliot) there is not the similar transparency of form,
the feeling of 'being there', the touch of hard, unmistakable reality at the tip of one's senses. Instead, there is an unnerving, unsatisfying sense of having a smoked glass between oneself and the world of her novels where life is hazed over, as it were, by a film of unreality. Does Murdoch employ a different mode of realism, which is an intelligent combination of the tradition of romance and the Gothic, with a sort of naturalistic rendering of details? It is difficult to answer this. Lorna Sage remarks:

... Which brings one back to the question of the peculiar kind of illusion her novels are after ... settled into a confident formula which stressed both the richness of details and its disposability. Presumably it works so well because it feeds the moral curiosity about 'otherness' without subjecting any one set of characters to the kind of intense scrutiny that might merge them with the author... her basic procedure is a loose form of allegory and her mythological figures are deliberately attached to particular pieces of canvas, as though she is insisting on their being human creations.

The end result of her fiction is an unreal texture
of work that generates unease. Shakespeare also employs the romance, but the characters and situations in Shakespeare are full-bodied realities that sustain the moral truth they suggest. The combination of stringent moral truthfulness with the sense of the unreal and the mythical in Murdoch is hard to assimilate. This is perhaps the reason for the feeling of discomfort, of there being a 'problem' in the Murdoch oeuvre.

What is the reason for the air of myth which suffuses the world of her novels? It is predominantly at play in her earlier 'Gothic' work, but is also tangible in the nebulous unreality that hangs over as 'modern' and recent a novel as The Book and the Brotherhood which tackles issues of the legitimacy of one political system over another, technological development, and shows the whole boiling pot of contemporary affairs. That Murdoch is aware of this quality of myth underlying her work is made clear by her words, when she admits that her books:

have a rather constricting myth-making tendency about them ... there's a sort of dragon mythical power that uncurls itself within the plot and to some extent determines what the characters must do and think. And there is a danger that this dragon can take over the book.
Though she denies that she is a philosophical novelist in many of her interviews, it must be said that her novels are essentially idea-based and not people-based; surely this contributes to the feeling of there being a mythical world in her fiction. This is not to say that there is no concern for people — no writer could be as compassionately and yet, as amusingly, understanding about human nature, and as concerned about it, and as interested in it, as Iris Murdoch. Yet it should be specified that the interest and concern is about human nature as seen in her characters, and not the individual human being. It is going a little too far to say that:

... Her characters are interesting puppets and interesting symbols, and she can make them dance or place them erect in an eerie green light. An intellectual game is going on. There is no sweat, no anguish, and no real love making. All of these are illusions. The real game is between Miss Murdoch and her reader, not between the reader and the characters. That is her strength and her limitation.

Her characters are not puppets. Iris Murdoch is too intelligent an artist to let that happen. But they
are not warm, breathing entities either—at least not most of them. They hover in the region of 'almost-there' but 'not-quite there', giving rise to the feeling of unreality. One reiterates here that reality and unreality are terms drawn from the tradition of realism that was constructed or developed in the nineteenth century and has lasted down to our own, though it has of course been under attack in the twentieth century.

Another factor behind the mythical atmosphere may be the intellectualism of her novels. It is perhaps Murdoch's apprehension of the transcendent idea of the Good, on the one hand, and her understanding of the imperfect human world (not evil in totality; rather ignorant and illusion-ridden) on the other, which make up the twin axes round which most myths revolve. This dialectic between the Good and the imperfect creates the pervasive underlying sense of myth militating against a 'transparent' realism and refers, by implication, to issues larger than the world described. And yet, on the surface, Murdoch seldom departs from the realistic ordinary world (The Unicorn is an exception). She inhabits, simultaneously, the world of the realistic novelist and the larger space in which that world turns. Little wonder, then, that though she aspires to be 'like' George Eliot and Tolstoy, she is not.

Extremely readable, disturbing, provoking the
reader's complacence, Iris Murdoch's novels are totally absorbing to say the least. They also demand a high degree of critical interest. To suggest that her work is of great significance not only in our time but for all time is not to make an exaggerated claim. It must be stated, however, that her work falls a little short of what Matthew Arnold would call the class of the truly best! The gap between her moral realism which makes up the content of her work and the form in which the content bodies itself; the very fact that such a gap can be discerned, testifies to the absence of an interknitted whole of the moral and the aesthetic. That perhaps is Iris Murdoch's limitation.